

EARLY POLITICAL CAREER

DRAWER

ADULT - NEW SALEM

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# Abraham Lincoln

## Before 1860

### Early Political Career

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

## LINCOLN'S FIRST OFFICE.

It Was That of Election Clerk in Sangamon County, Ill.

The Old Records Show It to Have Been in 1832, and His Total Compensation to Have Been \$3.50—They Also Show His First Vote in 1831.

Special Correspondence of the *Globe-Democrat*.

SPRINGFIELD, ILL., February 24.—The first public office Abraham Lincoln ever held was that of election clerk. The first official document ever written and signed by him was an election return. The first and only book he ever wrote was a poll book. Several of Lincoln's biographers relate this little incident: In the month of August, 1831, a local election was held in the town of New Salem. A clerk was needed at the polls, but few of the bystanders were qualified to act in that capacity. A tall stranger was loitering about the polling place. One of the judges asked him if he could write.

"A little hilt," was the modest reply; "I can make a few rabbit tracks."

Whereupon he was asked to act as clerk of the election, and said he "would try." The name of this clerk, as the tale goes, was Abraham Lincoln. This story, as it has gotten into the biographies, comes from Mentor Graham, Lincoln's early friend and tutor. Mr. Graham assures us that "Lincoln per-

formed the duties with great facility, much fairness and honesty and impartiality," and with pardonable pride adds: "I clerked with him on the same day and at the same polls." Mr. Graham relates this incident some thirty years after it is alleged to have happened, and he must have forgotten what really did take place, or his memory was faulty as to dates, for the truth is Lincoln was not an election clerk in 1831, and did not hold that office until more than a year later, when his ability to "make a few rabbit tracks" must have been quite generally known in New Salem—so well known, certainly, that no election judge would have thought it necessary to question him on the subject.

A few days ago I had occasion to examine some of the early records of Sangamon County, now preserved here in the office of the County Clerk. They are now rarely consulted, and it is not surprising that many interesting facts hidden away among them have eluded the biographer and the historian. Turning over the yellow leaves of a quaint old volume containing the proceedings of the County Commissioners' Court, my eye fell upon the following entry, under date of December 4, 1832:

"Thomas E. B. Farriss allowed \$1 as clerk of November election.

"A. Lincoln, same."

And a little further down the page, under the same date, in a list of persons paid for returning poll-hooks, was this line:

"A. Lincoln, same, \$2.50."

"In the old days New Salem was a village in the big county of Sangamon. Packed away in the basement of the Court House are all the poll books ever returned in Sangamon County. A little rummaging brought out the poll-book returned by Lincoln in 1832, according to the above entry. Plainly it had been undisturbed since it was folded up and put away more than sixty-one years ago. The record of the County Commissioners' Court was again consulted, but the name of A. Lincoln was not found among the election clerks of 1831; and a diligent search through the poll-hooks of that year failed to reveal one to which it was subscribed in the capacity of clerk. What was found, however, was the poll-book of the August election at New Salem in 1831, the identical election at which Mentor Graham says he "clerked with Lincoln." It shows that Mentor Graham was one of the clerks and Abram S. Berger was the other. Mr. Graham always possessed an untarnished reputation for veracity, and it is incredible that he should have deliberately invented the story ascribed to him. The truth probably is that Lincoln, loafing around the polling places, as Mr. Graham says, was called upon sometime during the day to render some clerical assistance of a trivial character, and the dialogue as related very likely occurred; but his name was not attached as clerk, nor did the "rabbit

tracks" of the "tall stranger" get into the poll book. The entire book, including the certificate attached at the end, is in the handwriting of Mentor Graham.

What gives the New Salem poll-book of 1831 a fascinating interest is the fact that in it is recorded the first vote ever cast by Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was then a recent arrival in that city. Only a few months before he had floated past the place on a flatboat. On returning from his voyage down the Mississippi he had drifted into New Salem. There he won the esteem and friendship of "the Clary's Grove Boys" by his now renowned bout with "Jack" Armstrong, and when the August election came on he was getting fairly established as a member of the community. He was then past 22 years of age, but this was his first opportunity to vote.

In a pioneer community like New Salem the election of a constable or magistrate was an event of the greatest moment. The work done on election day would not break a Puritan Sabbath. It was a holiday. The farmers flock to town. Men stood around in groups, talked of candidates and events, exchanged bear and "Injun" stories, smoked their pipes, consumed considerable liquor, and voted. Elections in Illinois at that day were conducted with very little red tape. There was no ticket peddling. There was no stuffing of ballot-boxes—mainly because there were no ballot-boxes to stuff. Such a thing as a secret ballot was unknown. It was also unpopular. Had any man ventured to suggest anything like the present Australian ballot system, he would have been suspected and shadowed. At New Salem he would probably have been "regulated" a little by "The Clary's Grove Boys." The people of Illinois had tried voting by ballot, but they did not like it. The system was too cumbersome, and required too much "book learning," and in 1829 the *viva voce* method of voting was restored. The judges and clerks sat at a crude table, with the poll book before them. The voter walked up and announced the candidate of his choice, and it was straightway recorded. The voters' names formed a column down the left side of the page, while the names of the candidates were written across the top, each in a separate column; and a black mark made by the clerk in one of these columns, opposite the name of the voter, indicated the voter's choice.

Such was the election at which Lincoln voted for the first time. The old poll-book in which his vote has been preserved is thus labeled:

"A poll-book of an election held in Clary's Grove Precinct on the 1st day of August, 1831, at the house of John Cameron's, in New Salem, to elect one Representative to Congress, two Magistrates and two Constables in the above-mentioned precinct."

There were 251 votes cast at this election. Lincoln was not among the early voters, being the 131st on the list. There were five candidates for Congressman, eight for Magistrate and eight for Constable. Lincoln voted as follows:

A. Lincoln—for Congressman, James Turney; for Magistrates, Bowling Green and Edmund Greer; for Constables, John Armstrong and Henry Sisco.

Both of Lincoln's candidates for Constable were elected. Bowling Green was elected Justice of the Peace, but Greer was defeated, Robert Conover being the other successful aspirant for that office. For Congressman James Turney was beaten by Joseph Duncan.

At that time Illinois contained only three congressional districts. Sangamon County was embraced in the Third. In "Clary's Grove Precinct" votes were distributed among the congressional candidates as follows: Joseph Duncan, 126; James Turney, 52; Edward Coles, 25; Alexander Pope Field, 7; Sidney Breese, 2. Party lines were not then closely drawn. The campaign was made largely on personal grounds. Who were these men and what became of them? All are now dead. Sidney Breese was the last to leave the stage. He died in 1878. It is a singular fact that Sidney Breese, who got only two votes at New Salem for Congressman in 1831, afterward became the most conspicuous and potent of all the five candidates. Just eleven years later he defeated Stephen A. Douglas for United States Senator. He was the only man who won the distinction of being a Judge of the Supreme Court under all of the three Constitutions of Illinois. For twenty-five years he sat on the Supreme bench of this State; and now, away up in the dome of the Capitol at Springfield, his statue stands in the galaxy of the great. Years after Lincoln voted at New Salem, he one day met Judge Breese. It happened that under the Constitution of 1848 all of the Judges of the Supreme Court were Democrats, and one time all three of them (Breese, Skinner and Caton) were natives of Oneida County, New York. Judge Breese mentioned the fact to Lincoln.

"Oh," said Lincoln, "I see. I was never able to understand before why this was a one-idea court."

Joseph Duncan, the successful candidate, was already in Congress. He was a politician of vast influence. In 1831 he was a strong "Jackson man"; but after his election as

Governor he deserted "Old Hickory" and became a Whig. Coles had already been Governor of Illinois, but he was not personally popular. James Turney, Lincoln's choice, lived in Green County. He was not a conspicuous figure in the politics of the State, but he was a follower of Henry Clay, and appears to have been pretty well thought of in his own district. He and Lincoln served together their first terms in the lower house of the Legislature in 1834, and he was later a State Senator. Alexander P. Field was at the time Secretary of State, serving from 1828 to 1840, when he was removed by Gov. Carlin because he had become a Whig.

Lincoln's vote for John Armstrong for Constable was peculiarly significant. "Jack" Armstrong was the leader of the "Clary's Grove boys," a gang of wild, reckless fellows, who sought the reputation of "regulators." Every new comer had to have his "metal tried," and "Jack" Armstrong was selected to try long-legged Abe Lincoln's metal. The wrestle between the two giants was a critical episode in Lincoln's life. But he proved himself "Jack" Armstrong's equal, and was received with open arms by the "Clary's Grove boys." Afterwards he and "Jack" Armstrong were stanch friends. So when "Jack" ran for Constable Abe voted for him, and doubtless elected him for him, and he was elected.

This has cast a somber shadow over the pages of this old poll-book. But the book is well preserved, and is filled with the names of the Clarys, the Greens, the Armstrongs, and of dozen of others familiar to students of Lincoln's life. All would have gone to oblivion long ago were it not that Lincoln once lived among them.

As has already been said, it was not until 1832 that Lincoln held the office of election clerk. Although a few months previous he had held a Captain's commission in the Black Hawk War, this was his first civil office. The return which Lincoln made out and attached to the poll-book of that election was beyond all doubt his first official document. Nicolay and Hay, in their "Life of Lincoln," fix upon the report of a survey made in 1834 as the earliest official document of Lincoln now extant, but this is clearly a mistake. The names in the poll-book of 1832 seem to have been written in part by Lincoln's assistant, William Green. But the certificate attached to the book is entirely in Lincoln's handwriting—even the signatures of the judges and the assistant clerk seem to have been written by him.

Lincoln's first vote for President was cast for Henry Clay. The election of 1832 was a presidential election. Andrew Jackson, then at the zenith of his popularity, was the candidate of the Democrats, while Henry Clay was the nominee of the National Republicans. Lincoln, as the returns show, voted on the unpopular side at New Salem. "A. Lincoln" is the last name on the list in this venerable volume. He was the last man to vote.

Lincoln was poor. But it was his good fortune to live in a community in which poverty was no disgrace. It was often said of him that he had "nothin' at all except lots of friends." But for the latter possession he would have been destitute. The Black Hawk War was over, much to Lincoln's regret, as he afterward confessed, for it gave him something to do. In this penniless condition he eagerly welcomed the opportunity to earn \$3.50 by clerking at an election one day and carrying the returns to Springfield, twenty miles away.

The election at New Salem in 1832 was held at Samuel Hill's house November 5. The judges were James Rutledge, Bowling Green and Hugh Armstrong, and Lincoln's assistant clerk was William Green. Around these names cluster some of the most charming and melancholy legends of Lincoln's life—the story of Lincoln the navigator, Lincoln the merchant, Lincoln the lover. William Green became attached to Lincoln early in his career. Many years afterward he told of the first time he ever saw Lincoln. "Lincoln," said he, "was in a flatboat in the Sangamon River. The boat was stranded on a mill-dam at New Salem. It was full of water, and Lincoln had his trousers rolled up 5 feet, more or less. He got the prow of the boat over, and then, instead of waiting to haul out the water, he hored a hole through the projecting prow and let it run out, and the boat passed over the dam." William Green entered Illinois College at Jacksonville, and one time he brought home with him a number of his fellow-students, among them Richard Yates, afterward Governor of Illinois. Green took the boys around to see Abe. They found him stretched out on a cellar door reading a book. Then the future President and future Governor met for the first time. Lincoln and William Green both clerked in Denton Offutt's ill-starred store. They slept together, and such were their accommodations. Green says, that when one turned over the other turned also.

James Rutledge, with John Cameron, at whose house Lincoln the year before cast his first vote, was the founder of New Salem. It was the Rutledge mill-dam on which Lincoln's flatboat stranded. James Rutledge was the devoted friend of Lincoln to the end of his life. With his beautiful and attractive daughter, Anne Rutledge, Lincoln fell in love. It was his first love, and he loved ardently, deliriously. Poor Anne! poor Abe! In the sunniest, sweetest hour of her life she died. So great was the grief of the bereaved lover that his friends thought him hopelessly insane. Three-quarters of a mile below New Salem, under the brow of a big bluff, stood the log house of Bowling Green. To this humble refuge poor Abe Lincoln was taken, and there he remained, under the kind and loving care of Bowling Green, "until," as one of his biographers says, "his reason seemed to be restored." But the death of Anne Rutledge shadowed all his remaining years. All his life Bowling Green was the unfaltering friend of Lincoln. The Sangamon County records testify to the close and friendly relations which existed between the two men.

Twice in 1834, the records show, Lincoln was called upon to act in the capacity of election clerk. His reputation as one of the few lettered men of New Salem was now securely established. He could write a plain hand, and he knew how to spell—two accomplishments which could not fail to distinguish him there. Whenever a "scribe" was needed Abe Lincoln was sure of a job.

"The house of John Cameron" and "the house of Samuel Hill," where these two memorable elections were held, are now only a reminiscence. The town of Petersburg grew up a short distance down the river. Long ago the taverns, stores and little log shanties of New Salem, one by one, were moved off or rotted down, and the people moved away. The old streets have faded out. Tall trees have grown up. It is a desolated spot, where all that breaks the silence of a

Globe Democrat 2-25-94

LINCOLN AS AN ELECTION CLERK IN NEW  
SALEM.

(*McClure's Magazine for December.*)

NEW SALEM, founded in 1829 by James Rutledge and John Cameron, and a dozen years later a deserted village, is rescued from oblivion only by the fact that Lincoln was once one of its inhabitants. His first sight of the town had been in April, 1831, when the flatboat he had built and its little crew were detained in getting their boat over the Rutledge and Cameron milldam, on which it lodged. When Lincoln walked into New Salem, three months later, he was not altogether a stranger, for the people remembered him as the ingenious flatboatman who, a little while before, had freed his boat from water (and thus enabled it to get over the dam) by resorting to the miraculous expedient of boring a hole in the bottom.

Offutt's goods had not arrived when Mr. Lincoln reached New Salem; and he loafed about, so those who remember his arrival say, good-naturedly taking a hand in whatever he could find to do, and in his droll way making friends of everybody. By chance, a bit of work fell to him almost at once, which introduced him generally and gave him a chance to make a name in the neighborhood. It was election day. The village schoolmaster, Mentor Graham by name, was clerk, but the assistant was ill. Looking about for some one to help him, Mr. Graham saw a tall stranger loitering around the polling place, and called to him, "Can you write?" "Yes," said the stranger, "I can make a few rabbit tracks." Mr. Graham evidently was satisfied with the answer, for he promptly initiated him; and he filled his place not only to the satisfaction of his employer, but also to the delectation of the loiterers about the polls, for whenever things dragged he immediately began "to spin out a stock of Indiana yarns." So droll were they that years afterward men who listened to Lincoln that day repeated them to their friends.

HOW LINCOLN OFFERED HIMSELF AS A CANDIDATE FOR THE LEGISLATURE IN 1832.

(*McClure's Magazine* for January.)

THE audacity of a young man in his position presenting himself as a candidate for the legislature is fully equalled by the humility of the closing paragraphs of his announcement :

"But, fellow-citizens, I shall conclude. Considering the great degree of modesty which should always attend youth, it is probable I have already been more presuming than becomes me. However, upon the subjects of which I have treated, I have spoken as I have thought. I may be wrong in regard to any or all of them; but, holding it a sound maxim that it is better only sometimes to be right than at all times to be wrong, so soon as I discover my opinions to be erroneous, I shall be ready to renounce them."

"Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say, for one, that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow-men by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed. I am young, and unknown to many of you. I was born, and have ever remained, in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations or friends to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of the county; and, if elected, they will have conferred a favor upon me for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But, if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined."

P. S.—OCTOBER 18, 1887.—VOL. 1.—NO. 1.

## EARLY CAREER IN POLITICS

"Do you suppose," Lincoln once wrote, in a letter to a friend, "that I should ever have got into notice if I had waited to be hunted up and pushed forward by older men? . . . The way for a young man to rise is to improve himself every way he can, never suspecting that anybody wishes to hinder him."

Lincoln was always delightfully modest; but it is a grave error to suppose that he was too modest to ask for public office, or that he blushingly waited to have honors thrust upon him. He knew how to "push" himself—this was his great art—with apparent obtrusive or pretentious.

He never held an office which he did not actively seek. He longed for the Presidency quite as ardently as he did for a seat in the Legislature in his days of handbill politics. His nomination, which appeared so providential, would scarcely have been possible but for his previous political career, his known integrity and ability, and his peculiar position with reference to the vital issues of the moment; but it was ambitiously sought, and it could hardly have been secured without the valiant efforts of such master politicians as David Davis, Norman B. Judd, Leonard Swett, Jesse W. Fell, Stephen T. Logan, and a score of other Illinois men of that era of great politicians.

Lincoln's political ambition took definite shape in his candidacy for the Legislature, when he was but 23 years old. So far as known "older men" did not suggest his candidacy; indeed, a number of them had similar aspirations, and it was left to Lincoln to suggest the matter himself. In his famous hand-bill he proved his astuteness as a politician by appropriating as his platform a proposition of vital interest to his legislative district and one of great popularity therein—the navigation of the Sangamon River. He was beaten in this initial race, but so small a thing as defeat did not in the least deter him from persistently "pushing" himself for the same office two years later, with gratifying success.

Files of newspapers of the period furnish evidence of his reputation by 1840. They show that he stood among the first of the public men of the State. "Mr. Lincoln, one of the Presidential Electors for this State," said the Quincy Whig May 28, 1840 (and the extract is here reproduced for the first time), "is 'golng it with a perfect rush' in some of the interior counties. Thus far the Locofocos have not been able to start a man that can hold a candle to him in political debate. All of their crack nags that have entered the lists against him have come off the field crippled or broken down. He is now wending his way north."

In the Whig several months later are found some interesting character sketches of prominent

politicians of the day. They were contained in letters from Springfield, the Legislature being in session, and were written by "A Lobby Member." He wrote:

"Abraham Lincoln of Sangamon," wrote the correspondent, "is emphatically a man of high standing, being about six feet four in his stockings, slender, and loosely built. He is, I suppose, over 30 years old, has been in the Legislature repeatedly, and was run as one of the Whig Electors at the late election. Mr. L. is a self-made man, and one of the ablest, whether as lawyer or legislator, in the State. As a speaker he is characterized by a sincerity, frankness, and evident honesty calculated to win the attention and gain the confidence of the hearer." (From Quincy Whig, Jan. 9, 1841, now first reproduced.)

From the close of his legislative career until his election to the Presidency his only important public office, except the purely honorary one of Presidential Elector, was that of Congressman. One other office, however, he did hold in that period, and it is one which has been overlooked by the biographers. He was a member of the Town Council—a circumstance showing that, while he never pretended to seek office as a public duty, he was quite willing, after political honors had been showered thick upon him, to serve his community in an office which offered neither honors nor emoluments.

Lincoln's characteristics as a young politician were precisely those of his later years. When he sought an office—which was quite frequently—he was frank enough to tell the people which particular office he desired. It was not his habit to shift the responsibility for his ambitions to that mythical legion, the candidate's "friends." He believed that the office should not be required always to "seek the man"—the man being generally able to render valuable assistance to the office in its strenuous search.

It is difficult to say what contributed most to Lincoln's early political success, for he possessed all of the qualities of a politician of the highest type—an attractive personality, vast common sense, simplicity of manner and speech, energy, honesty, courage, and candor. All of these things were potent with the plain, honest, brave, and sensible people of the pioneer era.

Nevertheless, they did not by instinct discover great men in their midst, and it is perhaps well that Lincoln did not "wait to be hunted up and pushed forward by older men."

J. McCAN DAVIS.

[Mr. J. McCan Davis of Springfield, Ill., is an authority on the early life of Lincoln, and was an extensive contributor to the series of Lincoln papers published by McClure's Magazine in 1895-'96.]

W.E.L.

#### AN ANECDOTE OF LINCOLN

In each issue of the Week by Week from boyhood to his death. Save each copy. You will have anecdotes and illustrations that when put together will give you a very wonderful story of the life of the immortal savior of our country.

#### LINCOLN'S ENTRANCE INTO PUBLIC LIFE

In 1834 Lincoln was a candidate for the Legislature, and was elected by the highest vote cast for any candidate. Major John T. Stuart, an officer in the Black Hawk War, and whose acquaintance Lincoln made at Beardstown, was also elected. Major Stuart had already conceived the highest opinion of the young man, and seeing much of him during the canvass for the election, privately advised him to study law. Stuart himself engaged in a large and lucrative practice at Springfield.

Lincoln said he was poor—that he had no money to buy books, or to live where books might be borrowed or used. Major Stuart offered to lend him all he needed, and he decided to take the kind lawyer's advice, and accept his offer. At the close of the canvass which resulted in his election, he walked to Springfield, borrowed "a load" of books of Stuart, and took them home with him to New Salem.

Here he began the study of law in good earnest, thought with no preceptor. He studied while he had bread, and then started out on a surveying tour to win the money that would buy more.

One who remembers his habits during this period says that he went, day after day, for weeks, and sat under an oak tree near New Salem and read, moving around to keep in the shade as the sun moved. He was so much absorbed that some people thought and said he was crazy.

Not unfrequently he met and passed his best friends without noticing them. The truth was that he had found the pursuit of his life, and had become very much in earnest.

During Lincoln's campaign he possessed and rode a horse, to procure which he had quite likely sold his compass and chain, for, as soon as the canvass had closed, he sold the horse and bought these instruments, indispensable to him in the only pursuit by which he could make his living.

When the time for the assembly of the Legislature had arrived Lincoln dropped his law books, shouldered his pack, and, on foot, trudged to Vandalia, then the Capital of the State, about a hundred miles, to make his entrance into public life.

NEW SALEM was all worked up over Lincoln's candidacy. It was worth as much as a man's life, almost, to express any opposition to him. Unlike some others in politics, Abe Lincoln was always the most popular where he was the best known. He was not a prophet unhonored in his home.

Abe didn't have any money to spend, but this didn't keep him from making a vigorous canvass. I went everywhere with him, looking up to him as an elder brother. It got so that he wouldn't make a speech unless I was present, and many a time he discussed his plans with me as though I was a man twice as old as I was then.

"If I could vote you'd start for Vandalia tomorrow," I told him once.

"I know it, Jimmy; I know it," he answered, and put his hand on my head. "But maybe you'll have an opportunity to vote for me some other time."

Years later, when Lincoln was running for President and I took advan-

tage of the opportunity to vote for an honest man from Illinois for the highest honors in the land, I recalled those words.

Well, election day rolled around, and everyone in New Salem voted for Abe. But we didn't have enough votes to carry the day and Lincoln was defeated.

I don't think he took his defeat to heart, though, and at a later election he ran again and was elected.

\* \* \*

Before closing I want to express my appreciation of the generous act of William Randolph Hearst in purchasing the site of the old village at New Salem and of presenting it to the Petersburg Chautauqua Association. Every spot touched by the feet of Abraham Lincoln should be a hallowed spot, and especially the site of New Salem, which is associated with the most interesting portion of Lincoln's life, the period when he was in the making. What Abraham Lincoln afterward was, he was preparing for in those early days at New Salem.

1906

St. Nicholas, February, 1928.

## *Lincoln's Ambition*

FROM AN ADDRESS  
TO THE PEOPLE OF SANGAMON COUNTY,  
ISSUED MARCH 9, 1832

EVERY man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say, for one, that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow-men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed. I am young, and unknown to many of you. I was born, and have ever remained, in the most humble walks of life. I have no wealthy or popular relations or friends to recommend me. My case is thrown exclusively upon the independent voters of the country; and, if elected, they will have conferred a favor upon me for which I shall be unremitting in my labors to compensate. But if the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I have been too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.  
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## LINCOLN'S FIRST POLITICAL VICTORY

The centennial of Abraham Lincoln's first political victory is of sufficient importance to recall the events leading up to his early success at the polls. On the fourth day of August, 1834, he was one of the four successful representatives of Sangamon County elected to the Ninth General Assembly of Illinois.

The first announcement of Lincoln's decision to run for the legislature appeared in the *Sangamon Journal* for April 25, 1834, as follows:

"We are authorized to state that A. Lincoln of New Salem is a candidate for representative for this county."

Nearly two months before this announcement, Lincoln participated in a meeting at New Salem which was called to discuss state politics. The *Sangamon Journal* for March 15, 1834, gave a report of the proceedings from which this paragraph is presented:

"Resolved that we will use every effort to promote the election of General Henry to the first office of this state at the next August election and we recommend him to our fellow citizens as a suitable person for the office . . ." The resolutions were ordered forwarded to the *Sangamon Journal* and signed by Bowling Green, the chairman, and A. Lincoln, the secretary.

By the time of the election in August, thirteen candidates had signified their intention of running for the general assembly, four of which were to be elected. They were John Dawson, Abraham Lincoln, William Carpenter, John T. Stuart, Richard Quinton, Andrew McCormick, William Alvey, Thos. M. Neal, Shadrack J. Campbell, James Shepherd, James Baker, John Durley, and William Kendall. The first four were successful and the others who also ran followed in the order named, William Kendall being low man.

The election returns as first reported in the *Sangamon Journal* gave Abraham Lincoln 1,373 votes and John Dawson 1,370 votes. The following week, however, the *Journal* announced that "an error occurred in stating the number of votes received by John Dawson in last week's paper. He received 1,390 votes for representative being the highest number given for any one individual for that office." Lincoln's official count was 1,376. Many of the early Lincoln histories give the vote as first printed in the *Journal* which is responsible for the claim that Lincoln polled the largest number of

votes. In the autobiographical sketch which Lincoln prepared for Scripps he states that he received "the highest vote cast for any candidate." This same statement is made in the campaign biography prepared for Scripps and also in Howell's biography of Lincoln.

The large complimentary vote cast for Lincoln in 1834 was foreshadowed in 1832 when he ran for the office of representative. Although defeated in the county, he received all but seven of the 277 votes cast in his own precinct.

Howell's biography, as corrected by Abraham Lincoln, which has become one of our most valuable sources, submits positive evidence about Lincoln's early political affiliations in Illinois. It stated that "Parties, at this time (1832), were distinguished as Adams parties and Jackson parties, and in Lincoln's county the Jackson men were vastly in the ascendant. He was a staunch Adams man, and, being comparatively unknown in the remoter parts of the county, was defeated." Lincoln corrected this statement about his party allegiance. He crossed out the reference to "Adams parties" and wrote in the text "Anti-Jackson." Where he was called a "staunch Adams man" he changed it to "Anti-Jackson or Clay."

We have Lincoln's own statement that he voted for Henry Clay for president in 1832, but just when he became an avowed follower of Clay it is difficult to determine. Whom he favored in 1830 for Illinois state officers is not known. Tradition has always placed him in a Jackson environment in Indiana; and Lamon, Lincoln biographer, infers that his change to the Clay ranks occurred in Illinois as shown in the following paragraph:

"The Democrats were divided into 'whole-hog men' and 'nominal Jackson men'; the former being thoroughly devoted to the fortunes and principles of their leader, while the latter were willing to trim a little for the sake of popular support. It is probable that Mr. Lincoln might be fairly classed as a 'nominal Jackson man,' although the precise character of some of the views he then held, or is supposed to have held, on national questions, is involved in considerable doubt."

It is accepted generally that Abraham Lincoln's father was a Jacksonian Democrat as was also Ratcliff Boone, the most prominent politician in southern Indiana during the period the Lincolns lived there. It is very likely that

in his earlier days Abraham was brought up in a Jacksonian atmosphere but for some reason broke away from the political traditions of his father and kinsmen.

According to Lamon, Lincoln's Indiana environment was wholly Jacksonian. He claims William Jones, for whom Lincoln clerked the last winter he lived in the state, was "an ardent Jackson man himself, and he imparted to Abe the true faith as delivered by that great democratic apostle; and the traces of his teaching were never wholly effaced from Mr. Lincoln's mind. While he remained at Gentryville his politics accorded with Mr. Jones's, and even after he had turned Whig in Illinois John Hanks tells us he wanted to whip a man for traducing Jackson." Dennis Hanks, although greatly confused as to when Abraham Lincoln became a Whig, admits that it was Jones who exerted the greatest political influence over Lincoln.

Lamon is in error about William Jones's politics as we now have evidence he was a Clay man. The *Evansville Daily Journal* of July 19, 1860, makes this statement:

"William Jones is an old citizen of the country who has taken little active part in politics since the Clay and Polk campaign and who on learning the defeat of his favorite in that memorable contest was for several days incapacitated for attending to his usual business. He appeals to his friends, to give old Abe their undivided support."

As early as 1825 and 1826 the *Western Sun* of Vincennes published eighteen long articles by or about Henry Clay. These were undoubtedly made accessible to Lincoln and probably furnished him with his first introduction to the great statesman.

In a biographical sketch which Lincoln prepared in 1859 he made the statement: "Always a Whig in politics." In the famous debate with Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, he referred to Clay as "my beau ideal of a statesman, the man for whom I fought all my humble life."

It does not appear as if there should be any confusion about the political atmosphere in which Lincoln moved previous to his first election to public office one hundred years ago, August 4, 1834.

Of this fact we may feel certain: that when Abraham Lincoln left Indiana for Illinois in 1830, just at the time he became twenty-one years of age, he was a follower of Henry Clay.



# Lincoln Lore

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Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the  
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## The Political Life Of New Salem, Illinois

Lincoln's earliest political surroundings have always somewhat baffled scholars. The reasons for this are many and varied. Inadequate documentation and Whiggery's marginal existence as almost a subculture in Democratic Illinois are two factors. A third, perhaps more important, is the unpopularity of the Whig party among historians. Much of the best work on Lincoln was produced at a time when historians were prejudiced against the Whigs. Most writers liked Lincoln well enough, but they disliked the party to which he devoted the greater part of his political life (he was a Whig twice as long as he was a Republican).

Only recently have historians come to have a greater appreciation for the importance, one might almost say the vision, of the Whig party. G.S. Boritt comes immediately to mind for those who work in the Lincoln field, but there are others, such as Daniel Walker Howe, who have been giving the Whigs a fairer shake. This new work has gained attention and made historians think. It has not yet stemmed the tide, and more students should be reevaluating Lincoln's early political environment.

All in all, the effect of the modern unpopularity of Whiggery on the study of Lincoln's early career has been to keep the number of such studies small and to emphasize Lincoln's personal popularity. Nowhere has this emphasis been more pronounced than in the work on Lincoln in New Salem.

Studies of New Salem rarely focus on the political life of the town in which Lincoln forged his early career. Historians have generally shied away from characterizing the town as Whig or Democratic. Most say only that it was democratic (with a small "d") and that this openness accounts for

Lincoln's opportunity to have a political career despite his "defective" education, his inability to settle into a successful vocation, and his penniless and debt-ridden economic status. The beginnings of Lincoln's career in the Illinois legislature seem to represent a triumph of personal popularity and of the American political system. That it was also a triumph of one political party over another rarely gains mention, much less careful consideration.

Here inadequate documentation is *not* a problem. The opportunity to understand Lincoln's political career before the 1850s is probably greater than for any other of America's political giants. Illinois's voters showed their preference at the polls orally, and clerks carefully marked how each citizen voted. Therefore, we know in Lincoln's case precisely—by name—who voted for him and against him. Knowledge like this is unobtainable even for twentieth-century politicians or contemporary elections. We know for sure who voted for Lincoln, something we can never know in the cases of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, or even Ronald Reagan.

### Who Voted for Lincoln?

The records do not exist for every precinct in every election, but a substantial number have survived. The poll books for the election of August 1, 1836, in New Salem precinct still exist. Lincoln was running for reelection to the Illinois House of Representatives. Sangamon County, of which New Salem was still a part, was to choose seven Representatives, and each voter could vote for as many as seven House candidates. Voters also chose a Congressman, a state senator, and

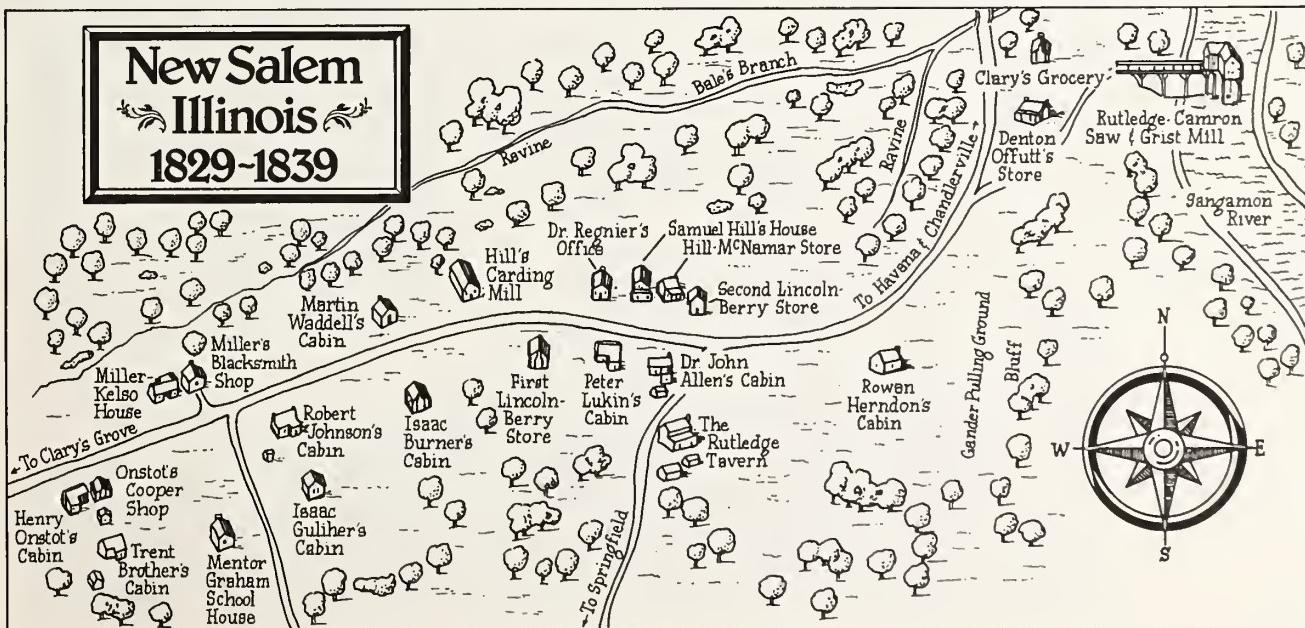


FIGURE 1. Map of Lincoln's home town from 1831 to 1837.

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various county officials. For this election, incidentally, there were two New Salem precinct polling places, a fact not previously mentioned in the literature. Only one of them was in tiny New Salem proper. The other was outside of the town, probably to the west and perhaps to the northwest. Both polling places drew voters from a wide area, and the polling place in New Salem itself attracted many more than the 25 to 50 voters who lived in the town.

The New Salem poll books show that it was a Whig town. John Todd Stuart, the Whig candidate for the United States House of Representatives, gained 86 votes to Democrat William L. May's 59. In the race for the state senate, Whig Job Fletcher outpolled Democrat Moses K. Anderson 73 to 67. In the races for the lower house, five of the seven Whigs gained more votes than any Democrat. Lincoln led the pack with a whopping 107 votes from the 145 voters who came to the polling place. He was followed by William Elkin with 84, Ninian W. Edwards with 84, John Dawson with 82, Dan Stone with 81, Robert L. Wilson with 69, and Andrew McCormick with 67. Lincoln students, of course, recognize these as members of the Long Nine. Thomas Wynne led the unsuccessful Democrats with 71 votes. He was a local man, and no other Democrat topped any Whig's votes in New Salem.

Thus the New Salem poll books also reveal Lincoln's immense local personal popularity, a factor properly noted by historians of the past. One should not ignore the partisan cast of New Salem, however. The peculiar system of voting on many candidates to represent Sangamon County in the legislature allowed for considerable ticket-splitting. Likewise, the rather tentative nature of party formation in Illinois at this date meant that the discipline or regularity of the voters was weaker than it would be in the 1840s, when ticket-splitting became rare. Richard P. McCormick, the outstanding expert on the formation of the Whig and Democratic parties characterizes the party situation in Illinois before 1835 as "chaos." Preparation for the 1836 Presidential election served to coalesce the voters somewhat and saw the Democrats institute a convention system for nominations. The opposition to the Democrats was still only loosely organized and did not put together a modern party organization until about 1840. Thus the degree of party regularity in New Salem was substantial under the conditions. One might say that in 1836 there were about 80 Whigs and about 60 Democrats.

Modern-day visitors to New Salem State Park might get a new feeling about the quaint pioneer village as they meander through it by keeping in mind the Whiggish cast of the town itself. Of course, the reconstructed village does not represent the town at one particular time. It represents a sort of average of a six-year period. Different people lived in the log houses at different times, and it is not possible to identify the politics of all its inhabitants.

Nevertheless, entering the village from the west, one first

encounters Henry Onstot's cabin. In 1836 he voted for Stuart, Lincoln, and the other six Whig candidates for the lower house. The Trent brothers' cabin to the south was full of Democrats. Alexander, Henry, and William Trent voted for May and, with one exception, for the Democratic candidates for the lower house. Alexander Trent, a veteran of Lincoln's company in the Black Hawk War, split his ticket to vote for his old captain. Joshua Miller and John A. "Jack" Kelso married sisters and lived in a double house north of Onstot's cooper shop. Both men were Whigs. Martin Waddell, the hatter, lived next door to Miller's blacksmith shop. Waddell was also a Whig. To the south of these residences lay Robert Johnson's cabin, Isaac Guliher's cabin, and Mentor Graham's schoolhouse. Johnson, a wheelwright and cabinetmaker, voted Whig. Guliher did not vote; perhaps he had moved on from New Salem. Graham lived outside town, but he came to town to vote for Stuart, Lincoln, and five Whig candidates for the lower house. He also voted for Thomas Wynne, a Democrat, for the state legislature.

Isaac Burner did not vote in New Salem in 1836. Alexander Ferguson, who had succeeded Peter Lukins as the local shoemaker, was a Democrat. The town's leading businessman Samuel Hill, Dartmouth-educated Dr. John Allen, and Dr. Francis Regnier were Whigs. The rest of the cabins on the east side of town were shops except the old Herndon cabin, the occupants of which in 1836 are unknown.

#### The Myth of the Clary's Grove Boys

The other New Salem precinct in 1836 was less solidly Whig. Lincoln got 50 of its 76 votes, but May edged Stuart, 40 to 34. In this area of Sangamon County, Lincoln's personal popularity did triumph over local political preference. The names of the voters at this unlocated poll include many of those associated with the Clary's Grove, Concord, and Sandridge areas.

A special mythology surrounds these residents of New Salem's outskirts. The "Clary's Grove boys," as they are called, were representatives of what some historians call the



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FIGURE 2. Joshua Miller's reconstructed blacksmith shop in New Salem.

first frontier. They were rough, fun-loving, and boisterous men of rather unsteady habits. Lincoln, the artisans, doctors, and businessmen of New Salem were men of the more settled second frontier. Lincoln's ability to capture the friendship of the Clary's Grove boys has always gained considerable attention from his biographers. First, it really was important. As members of his company in the Black Hawk War in 1832, the Clary's Grove boys had a hand in Lincoln's first political success: his election as captain of the unit. Second, the way he gained their respect—the famous wrestling match with Jack Armstrong—is the anecdotal stuff of which readable biographies are made. Unlike some important events, this one offers the bonus of making a good story.

Finally, Lincoln's friendship with the Clary's Grove boys has been the focus of much attention because of the peculiar importance of the American West to historians in the period when much of the great writing on Lincoln occurred. In the 1890s, Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" identified American democracy and individualism with the West. The frontier was supposed to be the cutting edge of the experience that made America, America and not a pale imitation of the European culture from which most Americans stemmed. For Lincoln to capture the hearts and minds of the Clary's Grove boys was vital to the process by which he maintained his status as the ideal American statesman to most historians. This showed that, despite Lincoln's choice of the law as a vocation and his political and personal friendships with bankers and businessmen, he was linked to the vital experience that forged American democracy.

Scholarship has moved on since those times, and the frontier experience has greatly diminished in importance in the works of American history. The residue of this once important story remains in Lincoln biographies. Oscar and Lilian Handlin's recent *Abraham Lincoln and the Union* notes that Lincoln was "Equally at ease with the boys in the Clary's Grove gang and with the Reverend Cameron." A more important book, Stephen B. Oates's fine *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, carries the idea a bit farther. Describing Lincoln's campaign for the legislature in 1836, Oates says, "On the campaign trail, Jack Armstrong and the Clary Grove boys sang Lincoln's praises and helped keep order at his political rallies." Oates merely states explicitly what is implied in most of the Lincoln literature that preceded his book.

Jack Armstrong may have campaigned in 1836, but he did not vote, either in the state election in August or in the national election in November. And the Clarys were certainly Democrats. John, Spencer, and Zack Clary voted in the New Salem precinct in 1836. Spencer and Zack voted for William L. May and for the seven Democrats seeking seats in the Illinois House. John Clary split his ticket, voting for Stuart, Lincoln, and three other Whig aspirants to the legislature as well as for four Democrats running for the legislature. The Clarys voted in the poll outside New Salem. The other families associated with the Clarys have never been precisely identified, and the Clarys and Armstrongs may not have spoken for all the "boys." Nevertheless, this is not the stuff of which loyal campaign workers are made, and it seems almost certain that the Armstrongs and Clarys were no part of Lincoln's canvass for the Illinois House of Representatives in 1836. Politically, Lincoln was much more at home on the streets of New Salem than in Clary's Grove.

#### Whigs and Democrats in the Developing West

New Salem was solidly Whig. In the Presidential election the following November, the town's voters gave 65 votes to Hugh Lawson White and only 34 to Martin Van Buren (only one poll book for the precinct exists). Dr. Allen, Caleb Carman (at whose house, probably the Trents' former home, the poll was located), Robert Johnson, Jack Kelso, Lincoln, Joshua Miller, Dr. Regnier, and Martin Waddell voted for White. Alexander Ferguson and the Trents (who had apparently moved outside town) voted Democratic. Mentor Graham, who also resided outside New Salem, voted Whig.

Lincoln left New Salem for Springfield before the next election. In 1838 he again ran successfully for the Illinois legislature. New Salem had changed. Its citizens shared with most other residents of northwestern Sangamon County a



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Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 3. New Yorker Martin Van Buren's lack of popularity in the West spurred Whig organization in 1836.

desire to form a new county with, of course, a new county seat. Lincoln and the rest of the Long Nine, busy with internal improvements bills and the drive to move the state capital to Springfield, were unresponsive. New Salem's residents registered their dismay at the polls in 1838. The Whigs lost ignominiously. Lincoln led the Whig candidates for the lower house of the legislature with a paltry 31 votes out of 122 (almost double the total of any other Whig candidate for the Illinois House but not even a third of what the Democratic candidates got). Even Lincoln's local popularity could not overcome the disappointment of New Salem's citizens. John Todd Stuart, who was immune from the county-division conflict in Washington, ran ahead of Lincoln with 39 votes but well behind his Democratic opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, who gained 81 votes. A few remained faithful to Lincoln (Waddell, Kelso, Carman, Miller, and Graham), but even they split their tickets, usually voting for Democrats for the other legislative seats. Feeling for division of the county all but obliterated party regularity.

Lincoln was gone from New Salem by then, and his popularity and that of the Whig party in the rest of Sangamon County swept him to victory anyway. It is the experience before 1838 that is important, and it really is important. This is not a quaint exercise meant to add some of the bright color of partisanship to your next tour of New Salem State Park, though lack of attention to party politics is a notable failing of historical reconstructions, which usually ignore partisanship for the sake of a bland patriotism. This is a step in the reconstruction of Lincoln's early political environment.

That environment is looking more Whiggish every day. We know that Lincoln's father was a Whig and that his cousin was a Whig. We now know that the village in which he chose to make his independent way in the world was Whig. There is no anomaly in Lincoln's affiliation with the Whig party. The tendency to associate the frontier with democracy and democracy with the Democratic party is a hangover from the days when the West was thought to be the key to the American experience. Lincoln was a son of America's frontier, all right, but the West was politically and socially complex. When Lincoln moved to New Salem, he left his Whig home for a Whig town.

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*by Mary Jane Hubler*

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, 50 Chatham Road, Harwich Center, Mass.; Arnold Gates, 168 Weyford Terrace, Garden City, N.Y.; Carl Haverlin, 8619 Louise Avenue, Northridge, California; James T. Hickey, Illinois State Historical Library, Old State Capitol, Springfield, Illinois; Ralph G. Newman, 175 E. Delaware Place, 5112, Chicago, Illinois; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C.; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons, or the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

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